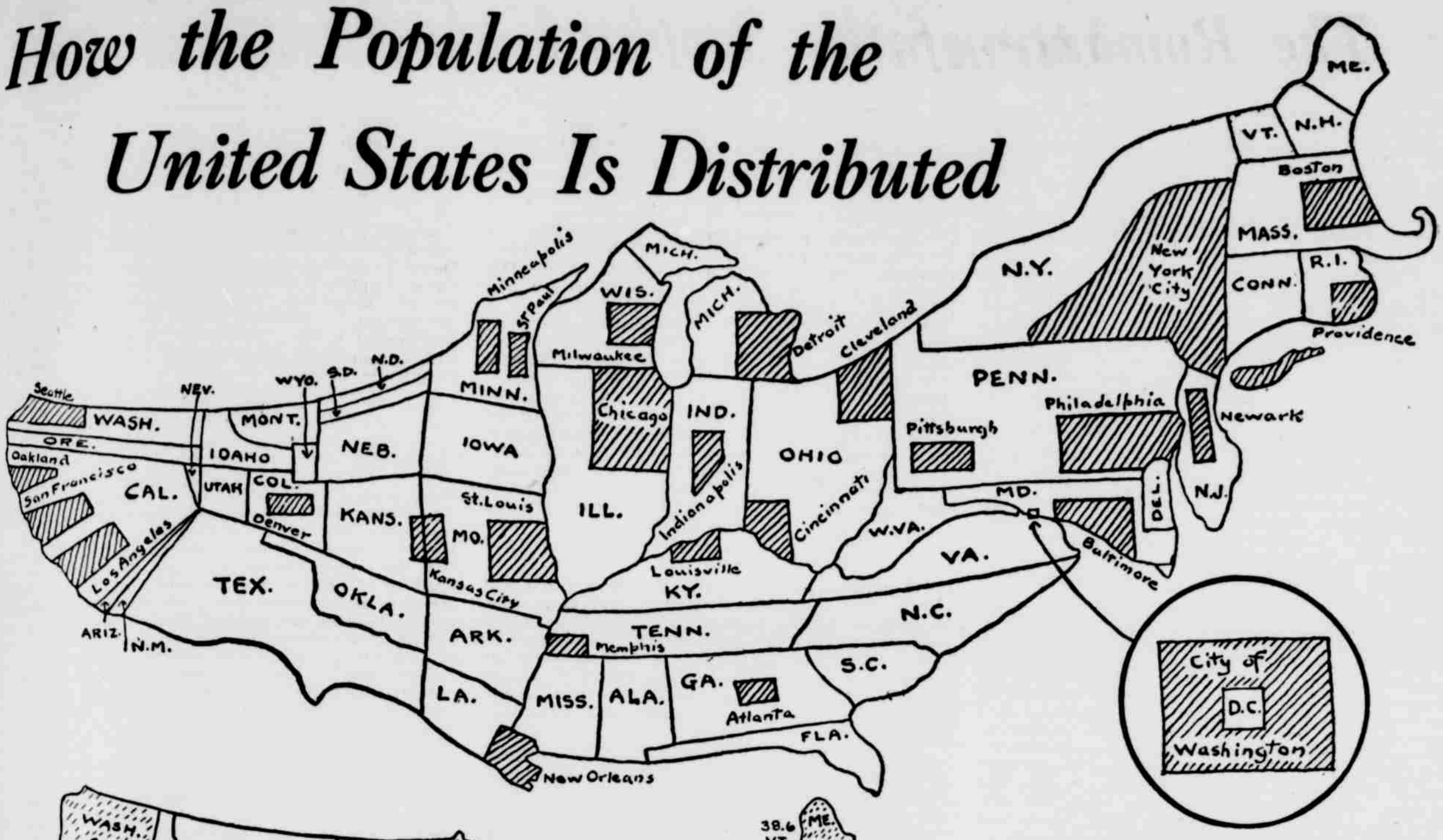
How the Population of the United States Is Distributed



How the population is distributed. Numerals show the average density of each state.

Every bright school child, who has studied geography, will realize at once that there is something wrong about this map. The states are distorted in shape and size and the cities are out of all true proportion. In one respect, however, it is approximately correct. Thus would the map of the U. S. appear if the people were all distributed evenly at the average of 35.5 persons to each square mile, and if each state retained its present population. The cities would occupy areas equivalent to those shown and the national capital would overspread the District of Columbia 20 times.

Spots Where the People Are Crowded in, and Spaces Where They Are Few and Far Between

MUCH interest attaches to population figures. Cities boast of their size as measured by the count of dwellers therein and point with pride to the increase in number or percentage of their inhabitants. States also find gratification in those comparisons which effect their relative rank and standing. Merchants, manufacturers, distributors and advertisers consult such statistics to determine upon what sections of the country they shall concentrate their best efforts, and, of course, in this respect, a good showing in the census reports has a value similar to that of a good commercial rating. One attracts a volume of business; the other enables a credit with which to handle it to advantage.

But population alone does not tell the whole story. A state or a country may become too populous. Authorities differ as to what is a safe and comfortable density of population for a large country with fertile soil and extensive natural resources. Holland and Belgium were both prosperous before the World War. The former supports an average of more than 500 to each square mile, while the density of the latter approaches 600. In England the density is even greater, but the products of that country cannot maintain her people. In a sense England is not self-supporting. She must import food and other necessities, paying for them out of the earnings of her factories and her commercial activities. Clearly, then, this is a density too great for comfort or safety.

It would seem that in the United States there need be little immediate worry on that account, for here the average density of the country is thirty-five and one-half persons to each square mile. It would seem that we can develop greatly within the next few years without passing the danger point. To illustrate, let us consider one of the most evenly developed states. Indiana is still "rural," in the technical meaning of the term. That is, there is a small majority of her population on farms or in cities, towns and villages of less than 2,500 inhabitants. Though she has only one city in excess of 100,000, there are three that approach that size and will doubtless soon achieve the distinction they covet. Other goodly cities, industrial and commercial centers, enjoy a prosperity above the average and the farms of the state have the advantage of proximity to good markets as well as a topography that makes good roads easy of construction and maintenance. The United States could not be regarded as over-populated if its average development were that of Indiana. If it were, the population of the country would be 241,777,257.

On the other hand, were we to become as congested as Rhode Island there would be over one and a half billion Americans, who, however great might be their material prosperity, could not produce their own food and raiment and who would have to revolutionize their home-building methods to procure adequate shelter. Yet even Rhode Island is not so crowded as England, and it would, therefore, seem that we have room for great expansion, if only we develop our land reserves somewhat evenly.

But this seems to be particularly what we are determined not to do. The map which shows by different shadings and numerals the density of each state according to the 1920 census reveals a variation of from 0.7 in Nevada to 566.5 in Rhode Island. The accompanying table, which shows the density according to each of the three preceding enumerations, proves that the congested areas are becoming more and more congested. That this is entirely due to our urban drift is unmistakable. Massachusetts, with an area of 8,039 square miles, has seven cities larger than 100,000, any two of which would exceed her rural population. Rhode Island's rural population is only 15,217, scarcely more than one-fourth that of Nevada, where there is an average of only seven persons to each ten square miles. There are fewer farmers in New York than in Alabama, Georgia, Missouri, or North Carolina, and New York City is more populous than the rest of the state. Michigan and Ohio have evolved from rural states recently because of the abnormal growth of one or two industrial cities. In all of these cities housing conditions have all but reached the endurance point and living costs have mounted higher than in other less populous centers.

Something of the extent of this urban drift is illustrated by a second map—if map it can be called—by means of which an effort is made to show how the map of the United States would appear if the population of the country were actually evenly distributed at the national average, 35.5 to the square mile, and each state retained its present population. The larger cities are extended to cover areas equal to those they would then occupy. If the so-called "metropolitan areas," or unannexed suburbs of these cities, and all the cities in or near the 100,000 class were also shown, the result would be even more strikingly illustrative of the fact that our urban drift has gone beyond comfort, if it hasn't brought us to the verge of danger.

The map, of course, depicts an entirely fanciful and impossible arrangement, but it does illustrate, more or less graphically, a condition that actually exists and that is constantly becoming more acute. We have land reserves, advantageously located and wondrously productive, but of what use are they if they are not developed? What is the difference between a country that cannot and one that will not produce its necessities? We may be in no immediate danger, but how long can we, if present tendencies persist, remain a safe, a prosperous, and especially a well-fed people?

	Area (sq. mile)	Population 1920	Average to Square Mile 1920	1910	1900	1890
United States	2,973,890	105,708,771	35.5	30.9	25.6	21.2
Alabama	51,279	2,348,174	45.8	41.7	35.7	29.5
Arizona	113,810	333,903	2.9	1.8	1.1	0.8
Arkansas	52 525	1,725,204	32.8	30.0	25.0	21.5
California	155 652	3,426 861	22.0	15.3	9.5	7.8
Colorado	103 658	939,629	9.0	7.7	5.2	4.0
Connecticut	4,820	1,380 631	286.4	231.3	188.5	154.8
Delaware	1,965	223 003	113.5	103.0	94.0	85.7
Dist. of Col.	60	437,571	7292.9	5517.8	4645.3	3972.3
Florida	54 861	968,470	17.6	13.7	9.6	7.1
Georgia	58,725	2,895,832	49.0	44.4	37.7	31.3
Idaho	83,354	431,866	5.2	3.9	1.9	1.1
Illinois	56 043	6,485,280	115.6	100.6	86.1	68.3
Indiana	36 045	2,936 390	81.3	74.9	70.1	61.1
Iowa	55,586	2,404,021	43.2	40.0	40.2	34.4
Kansas	81,774	1,769 257	26.1	20.7	18.0	17.5
Kentucky	40,181	2,416,630	60.1	57.0	53.4	46.3
Louisiana	45 409	1,798,509	34.6	36.5	30.4	24.6
Maine	29 895	768 014	26.0	24.8	23.2	22.1
Maryland	9,941	1,449 661	145.9	130.3	119.5	104.9
Massachusetts	8,039	3,852,356	479.2	418.8	349.0	278.5
Michigan	57,480	3,668,412	63.8	48.9	42.1	36.4
Minnesota	80,858	2,387,125	29.5	25.7	21.7	16.2
Mississippi	46,362	1,790 618	38.4	38.8	33.5	27.8
Missouri	68,707	3,404 055	49.4	41.9	45.2	39.0
Montana	146 201	548 889	3.8	2.6	1.7	1.0
Nebraska	76 808	1,296,372	16.8	15.5	13.9	13.8
Nevada	109 821	77,407	0.7	0.7	0.4	0.4
New Hampshire	9,031	443 083	49.1	47.7	45.6	41.7
New Jersey	7,514	3,155,900	419.7	337.7	250.7	192.0
New Mexico	122,503	360,350	2.9	2.7	1.6	1.3
New York	47,183	10,384,829	217.9	191.2	152.5	126.0
North Carolina	48,740	2,559,123	52.5	45.3	38.9	33.2
North Dakota	70,183	645,680	9.0	8.2	4.5	2.7
Ohio	40,740	5,759 394	141.7	117.0	102.1	90.1
Oklahoma	79,414	2,028,283	25.5	23.9	11.4	3.7
Oregon	95,607	783,389	8.2	7.0	4.3	3.3
Pennsylvania	44,832	8,720,017	194.5	171.0	140.6	117.3
Rhode Island	1,067	604,397	556.5	508.5	401.6	223.8
South Carolina	30,495	1,683,724	55.2	49.7	44.0	37.7
South Dakota	76,868	636,047	8.2	7.6	5.2	4.5
Tennessee	41,687	2,337,885	56.1	52.4	48.5	42.4
Texas	262,398	4,663 228	17.7	14.8	11.6	8.5
Utah	82,124	449,396	5.5	4.5	3.4	2.6
Vermont	9,124	352,428	38.6	39.0	37.7	36.4
Virginia	40,262	2,309,187	57.3	51.6	46.1	41.1
Washington	66,836	1,356,621	20.3	17.1	7.8	5.3
West Virginia	24,022	1,463 701	60.9	50.8	39.9	31.8
Wisconsin	55,256	2,632,067	47.5	42.2	37.4	30.6
Wyoming	97,594	194,402	2.0	1.5	0.9	0.6